

# “Why Should I Be Moral?” by F. H. Bradley

## Table of Contents

Ideas of Interest from “Why Should I Be Moral?” .....	2
The Reading Selection from Ethical Studies .....	3
Related Ideas .....	7
Topics Worth Investigating .....	9
Index .....	13



*F. H. Bradley* (Wikipedia)

### **About the author...**

F. H. Bradley (1846-1924), an Oxford fellow at Merton College, published major works in ethics, logic, and metaphysics. His nineteenth-century idealist outlook focuses a sharp and uncompromising criticism of empiricism, positivism, and utilitarianism. Bradley writes, “If ‘facts’ and principles conflict, so much the worse for the facts . . .”<sup>1</sup> In consequence, much of the early twentieth-century British analytic philosophy of Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore is written in reaction to Bradley’s linking the real and the rational. Bradley’s Merton fellowship does not require teaching responsibilities and

1. Quoted in John Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1966), 60.

“Why Should I Be Moral?” by F. H. Bradley

was contingent upon his remaining single. Brand Blanshard, who studied philosophy at Oxford, writes that, in part, because of poor health, Bradley was a recluse for almost fifty years. Bradley never married, although three of his works were dedicated to an unknown woman.<sup>2</sup> The critical polemics of his early work mellowed in his later years, and he had hoped to rewrite *Ethical Studies*, the book from which our reading is taken, but he did not progress beyond some initial notes.

### About the work...

In his essay “Why Be Moral?” appearing near the beginning of *Ethical Studies*,<sup>3</sup> Bradley states the aim of ethics is the realization of self: willing and acting in accordance with an ideal toward a moral end. He recognizes the realization of an ideal self is necessarily conditioned by an unrealized self, and in this regard, his ethics did not provide a metaphysical basis for relating the thought of the ideal with the reality of the actual. The metaphysical scaffolding for this he attempts to achieve in his later works, *Principles of Logic* and *Appearance and Reality*. The first part of our reading raises the question why I should be moral, but Bradley concludes the why-question is inaptly phrased. Instead, he thinks the question should be asked along the lines of what I am to do or be. What is the ideal I seek to realize?

### From the reading...

“Why should I be moral? ... the question ... is simply unmeaning.”

## Ideas of Interest from “Why Should I Be Moral?”

1. Explain and give examples illustrating the differences Bradley points out between ethical action being good for some result and ethical action being good in itself.

2. James W. Alland, “Bradley, Francis Herbert,” in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 85.

3. F. H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1876), 58-84 passim.

2. State and clarify the hidden presuppositions Bradley mentions to the question, “Why should I be moral?” Why does Bradley assert that to ask the question, “Why Be Moral?” is itself immoral, and what is his point in doing so?
3. Explain Bradley’s argument concluding that if good is a means to something else, then good cannot be an end in itself.
4. On what basis does Bradley conclude the question why I should be moral rests upon a mistake? If the question of why be moral makes no sense, then what question, according to Bradley, should we be asking?
5. Explain Bradley’s reasoning to support the conclusion that it is contradictory for anyone to claim immoral action is advantageous in life.
6. What are the reasons Bradley concludes morality is an end in itself?
7. Does Bradley believe it is possible to convince someone who claims (1) the use of reason cannot prove anything and (2) morality doesn’t really matter in life, that doing the right thing is a necessary condition for happiness?
8. On what grounds does Bradley claim the purpose of acting morally is the self-realization of the individual?

## **The Reading Selection from Ethical Studies**

### **[Morality Is Not a Means]**

Why should I be moral? The question is natural, and yet seems strange. It appears to be one we ought to ask, and yet we feel, when we ask it, that we are wholly removed from the moral point of view.

To ask the question Why? is rational; for reason teaches us to do nothing blindly, nothing without end or aim. She teaches us that what is good must be good for something, and that what is good for nothing is not good at all. And so we take it as certain that there is an end on one side, means on the other; and that only if the end is good, and the means conduce to it, have we a right to say the means are good. It is rational, then, always to inquire, Why should I do it?

But here the question seems strange. For morality (and she too is reason) teaches us that, if we look on her only as good for something else, we never in that case have seen her at all. She says that she is an end to be desired for her own sake, and not as a means to something beyond. Degrade her, and she

disappears; and, to keep her, we must love and not merely use her. And so at the question Why? we are in trouble, for that does assume, and does take for granted, that virtue in this sense is unreal, and what we believe is false. Both virtue and the asking Why? seem rational, and yet incompatible one with the other; and the better course will be, not forthwith to reject virtue in favour of the question, but rather to inquire concerning the nature of the Why?

**From the reading...**

“[T]he better course will be ... to inquire concerning the nature of the Why?”

Why should I be virtuous? Why should I? Could anything be more modest? Could anything be less assuming? It is not a dogma; it is only a question. And yet a question may contain (perhaps must contain) an assumption more or less hidden; or, in other words, a dogma. Let us see what is assumed in the asking of our question.

In ‘Why should I be moral?’ the ‘Why should I?’ was another way of saying, What good is virtue? or rather, For what is it good? and we saw that in asking, Is virtue good as a means, and how so? we do assume that virtue is not good, except as a means. The dogma at the root of the question is hence clearly either (1) the general statement that only means are good, or (2) the particular assertion of this in the case of virtue.

To explain; the question For what? Where to? is either universally applicable, or not so. It holds everywhere, or we mean it to hold only here. Let us suppose, in the first place, that it is meant to hold everywhere.

Then (1) we are taking for granted that nothing is good in itself; that only the means to something else are good; that ‘good’ in a word, = ‘good for’, and good for something else. Such is the general canon by which virtue would have to be measured.

No one perhaps would explicitly put forward such a canon, and yet it may not be waste of time to examine it.

## **[Could Good Only Be a Means?]**

The good is a means: a means is a means to something else, and this is an end. Is the end good? No; if we hold to our general canon, it is not good as an end: the good was always good for something else, and was a means. To be good, the end must be a means, and so on for ever in a process which has no limit. If we ask now What is good? we must answer, There is nothing which

is not good, for there is nothing which may not be regarded as conducing to something outside itself. Everything is relative to something else. And the essence of the good is to exist by virtue of something else and something else for ever. Everything is something else, is the result which at last we are brought to, if we insist on pressing our canon as universally applicable. . . .

It is quite true that to ask Why should I be moral? is *ipso facto* to take one view of morality, is to assume that virtue is a means to something not itself. But it is a mistake to suppose that the general asking of Why? affords any presumption in favour of, or against, any one theory. If any theory could stand upon the What for? as a rational formula, which must always hold good and be satisfied, then, to that extent, no doubt it would have an advantage. But we have seen that all doctrines alike must reject the What for? and agree in this rejection, if they agree in nothing else; since they all must have an end which is not a mere means. And if so, is it not foolish to suppose that its giving a reason for virtue is any argument in favour of Hedonism, when for its own end it can give no reason at all? Is it not clear that, if you have any Ethics, you must have an end which is above the Why? in the sense of What for?; and that, if this is so, the question is now, as it was two thousand years ago, Granted that there is an end, *what* is this end? . . .

## [Virtue is an End-in-Itself]

[W]hat is clear at first sight is, that to take virtue as a mere means to an ulterior end is in direct antagonism to the voice of the moral consciousness.

That consciousness, when unwarped by selfishness and not blinded by sophistry, is convinced that to ask for the Why? is simple immorality; to do good for its own sake is virtue, to do it for some ulterior end or object, not itself good, is never virtue; and never to act but for the sake of an end, other than doing well and right, is the mark of vice. And the theory which sees in virtue, as in money-getting, a means which is mistaken for an end, contradicts the voice which proclaims that virtue not only does seem to be, but is, an end in itself.

Taking our stand then, as we hope, on this common consciousness, what answer can we give when the question Why should I be moral?, in the sense of What will it advantage me?, is put to us? Here we shall do well, I think, to avoid all praises of the pleasantness of virtue. We may believe that it transcends all possible delights of vice, but it would be well to remember that we desert a moral point of view, that we degrade and prostitute virtue, when to those who do not love her for herself we bring ourselves to recommend her for the sake of her pleasures. Against the base mechanical *βαναυδία*<sup>4</sup> which meets us on all sides, with its ‘what is the use’ of goodness, or beauty,

4. Handicraft or mere mechanical art. *Eds.*

“Why Should I Be Moral?” by F. H. Bradley

or truth, there is but one fitting answer from the friends of science, or art, or religion and virtue, ‘We do not know, and we do not care.’ . . .

What more are we to say? If a man asserts total scepticism, you cannot argue with him. You can show that he contradicts himself; but if he says, “I do not care” there is an end of it. So, too, if a man says, “I shall do what I like, because I happen to like it; and as for ends, I recognize none” you may indeed show him that his conduct is in fact otherwise; and if he will assert anything as an end, if he will but say, “I have no end but myself”, then you may argue with him, and try to prove that he is making a mistake as to the nature of the end he alleges. But if he says, “I care not whether I am moral or rational, nor how much I contradict myself”, then argument ceases. We, who have the power, believe that what is rational (if it is not yet) at least is to be real, and decline to recognize anything else. For standing on reason we can give, of course, no further reason; but we push our reason against what seems to oppose it, and soon force all to see that moral obligations do not vanish where they cease to be felt or are denied.

**From the reading. . .**

“Has the question, Why should I be moral? no sense then . . . ? No, the question has no sense at all”

Has the question, Why should I be moral? no sense then, and is no positive answer possible? No, the question has no sense at all; it is simply unmeaning, unless it is equivalent to, *Is morality an end in itself*; and, if so, how and in what way is it an end? . . .

What remains is to point out the most general expression for the end in itself, the ultimate practical ‘why’; and that we find in the word *self-realization* . . . All that we can do is partially to explain it, and try to render it plausible.

But passing by [that] which we can not here expound and which we lay no stress on, we think that the reader will probably go with use so far as this, that in desire what we want, so far as we want it, is ourselves in some form, or is some state of ourselves; and that our wanting anything else would be psychologically inexplicable. . . .

If we may presuppose in the reader a belief in the doctrine that what is wanted is a state of self, we wish, standing upon that, to urge further that the whole self is present in its states, and that therefore the whole self is the object aimed at; and this is what we mean by self-realization. . . . And must we not say that to realize self is always to realize a whole, and that the question in morals is to find the true whole, realizing which will practically realize the true self. . . .

## [Why I Am to be Moral?]

We have attempted to show (1) That the formula of ‘what for?’ must be rejected by every ethical doctrine as not universally valid; and hence no one theory can gain the smallest advantage (except over the foolish) by putting it forward: that now for us (as it was for Hellas<sup>5</sup> the main question is: There being some end, what is that end? And (2), with which second part, if it fall, the first need not fall, we have endeavoured briefly to point out that the final end, with which morality is identified, or under which it is included, can be expressed not otherwise than by self-realization.

To conclude—If I am asked why I am to be moral, I can say no more than this, that what I can not doubt is my own being now, and that, since in that being is involved a self, which is to be here and now, and yet in this here and now is not, I therefore can not doubt that there is an end which I am to make real; and morality, if not equivalent to, is at all events included in this making real of myself.

If it is absurd to ask for the further reason of my knowing and willing my own existence, then it is equally absurd to ask for the further reason of what is involved therein. The only rational question here is not Why? but What? What is the self that I know and will? What is its true nature, and what is implied therein? What is the self that I am to make actual, and how is the principle present, living, and incarnate in its particular modes of realization?



*Merton and Christ Church College, Oxford, England* Bradley was elected as a Fellow to Merton College, terminable on marriage. (Adapted from Library of Congress)

---

5. Ancient Greece. *Eds.*

## Related Ideas

1. *Francis Herbert Bradley* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/bradley/>).

Stewart Candish discusses Bradley’s philosophy of history, ethics, logic and metaphysics. This authoritative entry from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* includes a summary of his life and reputation, as well as a thorough bibliography.

2. *Ethical Studies* (<http://www.books.google.com/books>).

An online reprint of the complete text of Bradley’s *Ethical Studies* is available from *Google Books*.

3. *Francis Herbert Bradley* [A Tribute by Brand Blanshard] (<http://www.anthonyflood.com/blanshardbradleyobit.htm>).

Brand Blanshard’s obituary of Bradley published in the *The Journal of Philosophy* (January, 1925) XXII, no. 1, 5-15, is provided by Anthony Flood at *AnthonyFlood.com*

4. *F. H. Bradley*, “An Unpublished Note on Christian Morality” (<http://www.anthonyflood.com/bradleyxmorality.htm>).

Gordon Kendal, an Oxford chaplain, edited Bradley’s unpublished defense of the charge that his writing on punishment and self-sacrifice were anti-Christian. Anthony Flood introduces and presents the article at *AnthonyFlood.com*

5. *A Critical Review of Richard Wollheim’s book on F. H. Bradley*. (<http://www.anthonyflood.com/blanshardwollheimbradley.htm>).

Brand Blanshard reviews Richard Wollheim’s book<sup>6</sup> on Bradley’s thought. The review was first published in the journal *Philosophy* (October, 1961) 36, no. 138, 372-374.

### From the reading...

“[W]hat is clear at first sight is, that to take virtue as a mere means to an ulterior end is in direct antagonism to the voice of the moral consciousness.”

---

6. Richard Wollheim, *F. H. Bradley* (New York: Penguin Books, 1959).



Surrey Zoological Gardens, London, England Clapham, Surrey England is Bradley's Birthplace. (Adapted from Library of Congress)

## Topics Worth Investigating

1. Explain the fallacy of complex question. Suppose Bradley's conclusion that the question why I should be moral “has no sense at all” is correct. Would this assumption imply that any system of ethics answering the question must be logically mistaken?
2. In this essay, Bradley assumes that “virtue” and ‘good’ are interchangeable terms and that neither is a means for something else. But if virtue and good can be distinguished, can't we argue *contra* Bradley, virtue can be a means for a good end? For example, the hedonist believes that pleasure, and only pleasure, is an intrinsic good. Doesn't the hedonist seek pleasure by the means of enjoyable experiences? If so, why, then, cannot the moral person seek the good by the means of virtuous actions?
3. What kind of why-question is “Why should I be moral?” For example, Wesley Salmon distinguishes a number of different types of why-questions:

There are many kinds of why-questions. Some why-questions are requests for scientific explanation as in “Why do methyl groups on cytosine in the promoter region of a gene switch it off?” or requests for metaphysical explanations as in “Why does God permit tsunamis and other natural disasters indiscriminately to take the lives of hundreds of thousands of persons?” Some why questions are requests for decisional justifications as in

“Why Should I Be Moral?” by F. H. Bradley

“Why did the United Nations Security Council unanimously pass Resolution 1441 offering Iraq a final opportunity to disarm?” Other why-questions solicit evidence as in “Why are astronomers so certain of the existence of invisible dark matter with no radiation?”<sup>7</sup>

In what manner is the kind of why-question Bradley asks best answered? Linguistic analysis? scientific inquiry? deductive argument? Is a teleological why-question to be answered differently from a causal one?

4. Explain Bradley’s reasoning to support the conclusion that any person who claims immoral action is advantageous contradicts himself. Show how this reasoning relates to the Socratic Paradox where Socrates argues doing the right thing is always acting in a person’s own interest as it is “tending one’s own soul”:

[My] attempt to prove that all things are knowledge, including justice, and temperance, and courage . . . tends to show that virtue can certainly be taught; . . . if virtue is entirely knowledge, . . . then I cannot but suppose that virtue is capable of being taught.<sup>8</sup>

In all situations, Socrates believes acting immorally is harmful to oneself and is equivalent to the exact opposite of acting with knowledge, i.e., acting in ignorance.

5. Bradley writes,

And so we take it as certain that there is an end on one side, means on the other; and that only if the end is good, and the means conduce to it, have we a right to say the means are good.

But isn’t it just possible in examining the relation of means to ends that some ends do not justify their means? Evaluate the ethical implications of Bradley’s position on the means-end relation.

6. Explain what Bradley means when he writes,

[T]o do good . . . for some ulterior end or object, not itself good, is never virtue, and never to act but for the sake of an end, other than doing well and right, is the mark of vice.

Is Bradley correct in his assertion that a virtuous means to a bad end is a contradiction of virtue as an end in itself? Can you construct examples illustrating his point?

7. Samuel Alexander writes,

. . . [T]he question, ‘why should I be moral?’ means most naturally and usually, what inducements are there to me to do right? . . . To the wicked the

---

7. Wesley C. Salmon, “Scientific Explanation” in Merrilee H. Salmon, et al., *Introduction to the Philosophy of Science* (Hackett Publishing, 1999), 8-9.

8. Plato, *Protagoras*, trans. Benjamin Jowett. 362.

pains and penalties of wrong-doing may be a sufficient deterrent, and the sanctions have their value in this connection. But to a good man they will make no appeal. The only sanction which will induce him to be moral is to reflect upon the unhappiness produced by the wrong act, an unhappiness which means the thwarting of good character and the violations of rights. This intrinsic unhappiness will be reproduced in the disapprobation of his own conscience. It is right to shrink from the pains of conscience, and these are the only personal pains from which a good man will shrink.<sup>9</sup>

To what extent can you argue Bradley would agree that we should be moral because the realization of ideal self implies good character? Similarly, Socrates’ answer to Glaucon in Plato’s *Republic* is that the moral life leads to a harmonious soul. Or would Bradley conclude we should be moral as an end in itself without regard for any future end?

8. Evaluate the following passage from the Bradley reading with respect to the evolutionary benefits of altruism:

But passing by [that] which we can not here expound and which we lay no stress on, we think that the reader will probably go with use so far as this, that in desire what we want, so far as we want it, is ourselves in some form, or is some state of ourselves; and that our wanting anything else would be psychologically inexplicable.

For example, Charles Darwin writes,

[A]lthough a high standard of morality gives but a slight or no advantage to each individual man ... an increase in the number of well-endowed men and advancement in the standard of morality will certainly give an immense advantage to the group. A tribe including many members who, from possessing in a high degree the spirit of patriotism, fidelity, obedience, courage, and sympathy, were always ready to aid one another, and to sacrifice themselves for the common good, would be victorious over most other tribes; and this would be natural selection.<sup>10</sup>

Darwin’s explanation is then that a group of altruistic individuals will be better adapted and out-survive a group of selfish individuals. Is not Bradley assuming, however, it is the nature of human beings to be egoistic? How do you think Bradley can account for altruistic behavior?

9. T. S. Eliot’s literary method is greatly influenced by his early study of Bradley’s metaphysics, and in his Harvard Ph.D. thesis,<sup>11</sup> Eliot explores Bradley’s relating of individual experience with absolute objectivity. In

9. Samuel Alexander, *Moral Order and Progress* 3rd. ed. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, & Co. Ltd., 1996), 326.

10. Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*. 2nd. ed. (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1909), 134-135.

11. T. S. Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley*, rpt. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

“Why Should I Be Moral?” by F. H. Bradley

that work, Eliot states, “All significant truths are private truths.”<sup>12</sup> Later, Eliot explains the interrelation among philosophy, experience, and poetry as follows:

What poetry proves about any philosophy is merely its possibility for being lived for life includes both philosophy and art . . . For poetry . . . is not the assertion that something is true, but the making that truth more fully real to us; it is the creation of a sensuous embodiment. It is the making of the word Flesh. . . . we may find a poet giving greater validity to an inferior philosophy, by realizing it more fully and masterfully in literary art, and another employing a better philosophy and realizing it less satisfactorily. Yet we can hardly doubt that the “truest” philosophy is the best material for the greatest poet; so that the poet must be rated in the end both by the philosophy he realizes in poetry and by the fulness and adequacy of the realization.<sup>13</sup>

Explain how Eliot’s assessment of poetry and philosophy reflects Bradley’s assessment of the ideal self and the real self as stated here:

What is the self that I know and will? What is its true nature, and what is implied therein? What is the self that I am to make actual, and how is the principle present, living, and incarnate in its particular modes of realization?

Is the universal ideal being realized in the particular individual or is the particular individual being realized in the universal ideal?

10. Lawrence Kohlberg suggests an addition his developmental stages of moral reasoning as follows:

Even after attainment of Stage 6’s clear awareness of universal principles, a fundamental ethical question still remains, namely, “Why be moral? Why be just in a universe that appears unjust?” This question asks whether there is any support in reality or nature for acting according to universal moral principles. . . . this question entails the further question, “Why live?”; thus, ultimate moral maturity requires a mature solution to the question of the meaning of life. This in turn, is hardly a moral question *per se*.<sup>14</sup>

By turning the question of why be moral into a nonmoral question, in what ways is Kohlberg’s proposed Stage 7 interpretation consistent with Bradley’s transformation of the question?

\*

12. Quoted in Lyndall Gordon, *Eliot’s Early Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 51.

13. T. S. Eliot, “Poetry and Propaganda” in *Bookman* (February 1930) LXX, 601.

14. Lawrence Kohlberg and R. A. Ryncarz, “Beyond Justice Reasoning: Moral Development and Considerations of a Seventh Stage” in *Higher Stages of Human Development*, eds. C. N. Alexander et al. (New York: Oxford University Press), 1990, 192.

## **Revision History**

*Revision 0.5 10.11.09 Revised by: lca, bp*

Permission is granted to copy, distribute and/or modify this document under the terms of the GNU Free Documentation License (<http://www.gnu.org/licenses/fdl.txt>), Version 1.2 or any later version published by the Free Software Foundation. Please send corrections or inquiries to “Editors” at

<philhelp@gmail.com>

## **Index**

- altruism
  - evolutionary benefit, 11
- amorality, 6
- Appearance and Reality
  - F. H. Bradley, 2
- Blanshard, Brand, 2
- Bradley, F. H., 3
- complex question
  - fallacy of, 9
- Darwin, Charles, 11
- dogma
  - definition, 4
- egoism, 6
  - selfishnes, 5
- Eliot, T. S., 11
- Ethical Studies
  - F. H. Bradley, 2
- ethics
  - purpose of, 2
- good
  - as a means, 4
  - as an end, 5
- hedonism, 5
- Idealism, 1
- Kohlberg, Lawrence, 12
- meaning of life, 12
- means ends relation, 3, 10

*“Why Should I Be Moral?” by F. H. Bradley*

Moore, G. E., 1  
morality, 7  
    (see also ethics)  
    as an end, 3  
    developmental stages, 12  
natural selection, 11  
poetry  
    and philosophy, 12  
real is the rational, 1  
Russell, Bertrand, 1  
self  
    idea., 11  
    nature of, 7  
self-realization, 2, 6  
    and character, 11  
skepticism, 6  
Socratic Paradox, 10  
virtue, 3  
    not a means, 4  
why be moral, 2  
    conscience, 11  
why-questions, 4, 9